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UCSB Conference to Highlight New Scholarship on César Chávez and the UFW

New research and scholarship that have altered the general understanding of the United Farm Workers (UFW) movement as well as that of labor and civil rights leader César Chávez will be the focus of a daylong conference at UC Santa Barbara on Friday, October 14.

"César Chávez and the United Farm Workers" will begin at 9 a.m. in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building at UCSB. Scholars will address topics that include "The United Farm Workers and the American Public," "The Union and Its Leadership: A Critical Appraisal," and "Culture and Ideology Within the UFW." The conference is free and open to the public.

"A new generation of scholars and journalists have begun to use new materials to rewrite and to illuminate the history of one of the most important social movements in 20th-century history," said Nelson Lichtenstein, the MacArthur Foundation chair in history at UCSB and director of the campus's Center for the Study of Work, Labor, and Democracy. "They have found that the farm workers movement led by César Chávez was far more complicated and contradictory than we have thought."

Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval, associate professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB and a co-organizer of the symposium, noted: "At a time when farm workers

are facing more challenging conditions perhaps than they did 30 years ago, there needs to be a frank and open discussion about why the UFW is so weak and ineffective today. Are the union's contemporary problems related to decisions that César Chávez made? That is one key question that this conference will address."

Taking a more critical look at Chávez's leadership, historians and journalists have found that the farm workers of the 1960's, '70's, and '80's were more skilled and more independent of the labor leader's guidance than previously believed, according to Lichtenstein. "On the other hand, Chávez was a skilled politician and inspirational leader who, in the end, helped subvert the UFW promise. Ultimately, Chávez didn't really want to fight for a trade union. He had a vision for a social movement, something much larger than collective bargaining," he said.

Citing the boycott of California grapes, for which Chávez and the UFW are most well known, Lichtenstein noted that it succeeded in part because it provided supporters around the world with a direct means of assisting the struggling union. "It was a very effective strategy that many other unions, non-governmental organizations, and other social movements have adopted," he explained. "Chávez pioneered all that. But the boycott provided such a powerful weapon that it enabled Chávez to ignore the immediate interests and grievances of the farm workers in the fields, and run the UFW in an undemocratic manner."

The conference came about following a burst of new scholarship reexamining Chávez and the UFW movement. Among the new books are Frank Bardacke's "The United Farm Workers and the Undocumented," Miriam Pawel's "The Union of Their Dreams -- Power, Hope and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Union," and Matt García's forthcoming book on the UFW boycotts. Bardacke is a teacher and labor activist who spent seven years working in the fields in California's Salinas Valley; Pawel is an award-winning journalist who worked at Newsday and the Los Angeles Times; and García is a professor of history at Arizona State University and director of the university's Program in Comparative Border Studies. All are participants in the symposium.

Other participants include Edwina Barvosa, associate professor of feminist studies and of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB; José M. Alamillo, associate professor of Chicano and Chicana Studies and history at California State University, Channel Islands; Alicia Chávez, visiting lecturer in history at California State University, Long Beach and at Scripps College; Dana Frank, professor of history at UC Santa Cruz;

and José-Antonio Orosco, associate professor of philosophy at Oregon State University.

More information about the symposium, including a complete schedule, is available at <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/projects/labor>.

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